

NOTES

Deshimaru Taisen, 1914–1982

Deshimaru Taisen was born on the Japanese island of Kyushu on November 29th, 1914, and died in Tokyo, a Sōtō Zen monk and great master on April 30th, 1982. After spending the last 15 years of his life in Europe spreading the Dharma of Buddha, he returned home to die of a diseased pancreas at the age of 68. With respect for the official and spiritual position he had acquired (he was Kaikyō Sōkan over all of Europe and Africa), funeral services were held at the temple of Sōjiji, where his ashes were divided into three lots, for his temple of Seikuji in Saku, Nagano prefecture, for his family, and for his disciples in Europe.

Deshimaru was raised by his mother, a devout follower of Shin Buddhism, and by his grandfather, a samurai before the Meiji Restoration. He graduated in economics from a university in Yokohama, studied philosophy at the University of Tokyo, married and had three children. He worked as a businessman, as secretary to the Japanese Minister of Finance, and as secretary to his master Sawaki Kōdō. With the advent of the Second World War, Deshimaru was sent to Indonesia to direct a copper mine for the Mitsubishi Mining Company.

Sawaki Kōdō was Deshimaru's only Zen master, and apart from the brief interruption caused by the war, they remained together for 30 years. Right before Sawaki Kōdō's death in 1965, he gave his disciple Deshimaru Taisen the monastic ordination and the name Taisen Mokudō; and on his deathbed the master gave him the spiritual transmission, along with his robe and bowl. (The official *shihō* was given to Deshimaru by Yamada Zenji of Eihei-ji shortly thereafter).

In the following year Deshimaru bade farewell to his wife, family, and friends, weighed anchor in the Yokohama harbor and sailed for Europe. He lived in a little room in Paris, in the back of a warehouse, slept on the concrete, wrote at his desk (an overturned barrel), ate only rice soup and did zazen. People came to him for conferences, and some stayed to sit, and soon a dojo arose—eventually to become the temple of Bukkoku-zenji on the rue Pernety. Meanwhile, other

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dojos arose in the French provinces, the Massif Central, the Alps, the Pyrenees; and in other countries far and near.

The stamp of his teaching, seen today in his 108 dojos scattered over Europe, Africa, Canada and the Americas, is Dōgen Zen, the practice of *shikan taza*: to sit in the proper posture, without moving, inside or out, in the perfect immobility of one-minded concentration. This is what is practiced at Bukkokuzenji and also at his big temple of La Gendronniere in the Loire valley. It is in this valley where thousands of the master's ordained monks and other disciples the world-over meet, during the summer months, in the practice of *zazen*.

"Treasure this teaching and pass it on through the generations," he would say. "Practice together, practice for the benefit of all living beings and you will do great good and surely you will find the infinite happiness of all the Buddhas."

A Personal Tribute

The master's name was Taisen Mokudō, a prophetic goat and Buddha in the west. He was a monk, an evangelist, and epistoler, a saint. He was a full-girthed Pantagruel with the feathered touch of Montaigne. He was earth-born, a man of the world, sowing his affections in palms and boughs. He could be puritanical, or otherwise machiavelian; but he was at all times one-minded and orthodox. He was the friendly professional teacher and wiseman. He was in fact a charmer of man and beast, and all who followed him, loved him.

The master's teaching was raw, like the iron of Nyojō, and light and delicate like a Jōshū rice-bowl. An artist painter he was, a poet's poet, a calligrapher of what always resembled his own face. And with him was a double-sized intelligence; he was an intellectual's intellectual, a Vimalakīrti, and a Dōgen scholar.

He ate only the marrow of bones (the spiritual food), along with an occasional hamburger, some sake, an American cigarette, and every morning a bowl of rice soup. He was, too, a teetotaller and vegetarian who dressed forever in white and black—a white kimono under a black one—wore a *kesa* over his left shoulder, embroidered with lovely little blue clouds, and wooden sandals. And in his hand he held a short staff, the *hossu*. He played Go, tit-tat-toe, darts, and the children he bought off with candy and chocolate. He arm-wrestled, hand-twisted, head-bunted. And for those who visited him in his temple parlor, he'd put on a record—Beethoven or Edith Piaf. He exercised his chest and lungs chanting, and when he sang the *Sandōkai*, *Fukanzazengi* or *Sanshō Dōei*, even the wind would stop, in contemplation.

The stamp of his teaching, seen in his 108 dojos scattered like barleycorn over Europe, Africa, Canada, and the Americas, was no more Japanese than Shakyamuni's was Indian and Eno's Chinese. Like them he was subject to no law; the morning star of Shakyamuni, the moon of Dōgen and the sun of

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ancient Greece were in all his words and acts. His was the universal law, valid in all countries and on all planets. To sit in the proper posture, without moving, inside or out, in the perfect immobility of one-minded concentration, this is all he brought with him from Japan. "And when I leave," he would say, taking the posture with great cheer, "there will be only this."

The master was forever alluding to the Chinese Zen patriarchs of past times, to Bodhidharma, to Nyojō and to Jōshū of the Rinzai School. But when he spoke of his own master Sawaki Kōdō, dead some 17 years now, it was something else. "Today I truly understand my master," he would say, not without feeling. "Today I am completely impressed with him. I thank you very much, my master!"

Sensei said the same things so many times—like Socrates. But for some reason it did not matter, his words were forever magical, meaningful, musical and in all ways delightful.

What's more, he was forever doing the same things. He was as predictable as a quartz clock. Always zazen, in the dojo, in the sesshins, during the summer retreats. The thing is, Sensei was happiest sitting with his disciples. Certainly, he would sometimes enjoy himself looking at the sea and listening to the sound of its waves, but he would never dally for long. He was always in a hurry to get back.

The man was a jolly sight to see. His head was round, shaved, and rusty colored. His ears thick, well-shaped and very big. The eyes brown, gentle and twinkly. Forehead large, clear and smooth. Nose wide and somewhat flattened. Teeth small and few (he wore false teeth). Neck sturdy, feet weightless and small. He was strong and of healthy body, and his movement was delicate and refined. But his rage, devouring everything, man and beast alike, was best avoided. He was earth-born, with one foot on the ground and the other not far from it.

He was always making friends, and he would tramp through muddy fields planting seeds along with anybody; or in the woods painting mute inscriptions on the trees; or drinking green-leaf tea or sake, and composing poems and translating the sutras, alone and together, until the cock crowed. He was rolling over with life and you just couldn't keep up with him. And when he talked to us, in his broken English during zazen, even his scribes—of which I was one—couldn't keep the pace. We worked in shifts. And in the mondos he could catch the goat by the beard every time. He was a sutra preacher for sure, but he was a quick one, like a fox.

Then late in the month of April—month of the diamond birthstone—the master set off for his native land, like an elephant on his way to the burial ground, and the next we heard he was dead.

PHILLIP COUPEY
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